

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
(OR-030-99-006)**

BLM OFFICE: Vale

PROPOSED ACTION: East and West Dry Creek Pasture Fences

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION: Arock Allotment

East Dry Creek:

T. 31S., R.43E., Sec. 26 S 1/2, Sec. 27 S 1/2 Sec 28 S 1/2

West Dry Creek

T.31S., R43E., Sec. 29 E 1/2, Sec. 32 NE

T.31S., R42E., Sec. 30 N 1/2, Sec. 19 SE, Sec. 24 SW 1/4

APPLICANT: Ed Davis, Livestock Permittee

CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE PLAN

This proposed action is subject to the following land use plans:

Name of Plans: Southern Malheur MFP (1983)

Southern Rangeland Program Summary (RPS) (1984)

The plans have been reviewed to determine if the proposed action conforms with the land use plan terms and conditions as required by 43 CFR 1610.5

REMARKS

This project is in conformance with the MFP and RPS and the objectives of improving and maintaining vegetative and soil conditions to benefit watershed, wildlife and livestock.

The proposed action is initiated by the livestock permittee and the draft environmental assessment was written by the permittee's range consultant; Mr. Dean Durfee.

NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

East Dry Creek Pasture The 4,370 acre East Dry Creek pasture consists primarily of crested wheatgrass and bluebunch wheatgrass. The crested seeding is located in the south 1/2 of the pasture, and the bluebunch wheatgrass native range is located in the north 1/2. The seeding was established in the early eighties. The pasture has a livestock carrying capacity of 437 AUMs with a stocking rate of 10 acres/AUM. The pasture is grazed every other year during April and May in rotation with other pastures located in the Arock Allotment. Although there are four watering areas located in the pasture, only one permanent source of water is located in the north portion of the pasture. The average utilization since the early eighties has been approximately 40% within the crested wheatgrass portion of the pasture. The utilization transect is located within the crested wheatgrass portion of the pasture and utilization readings have not been collected within the native range area. Visual observations taken the past three years showed approximately 10-15% utilization during the spring period with a 5-7 inch stubble height left on

most plants.

West Dry Creek Pasture The 4,511 acre West Dry Creek pasture also consists of crested wheatgrass and bluebunch wheatgrass. The crested wheatgrass is located in the south and southwest portion of the pasture while the bluebunch wheatgrass native range is found in the northeast part of the pasture. The pasture has a livestock carrying capacity of 436 AUMs with a stocking rate of 10.3 acres/AUM. The pasture is grazed every other year during April and May in rotation with other pastures located in the Arock Allotment. Although there are four watering areas located in the pasture, only two permanent sources of water are located in the south portion of the pasture. The average utilization since the early eighties has been approximately 43% within the crested wheatgrass portion of the pasture. The utilization transect is located within the crested wheatgrass portion of the pasture and utilization readings have not been collected within the native range area.

Livestock utilization studies within the seeded portion of the pastures have shown that decadent “wolfy” plants are common throughout 30% of the pastures. The occurrence of these plants has reduced overall health and productivity of the crested wheatgrass seeding. Construction of these fences would increase the grazing pressure on the seedings and improve the productiveness and vigor of the crested wheatgrass portion of the pastures.

Independent utilization studies in the native range areas by the permittees range consultant has shown bluebunch wheatgrass to be in the slight utilization class.

Trying to regulate or improve the distribution of livestock through manipulation of water has not been successful due to the existing location of the water. Similarly, salting and herding have not been effective and are economically unfeasible.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

Construct approximately 2.8 miles of permanent fence in the East Dry Creek Pasture and 2.7 miles of permanent fence in the West Dry Creek Pasture of the Arock Allotment. See attached map for the location of these proposed fences. Bureau specifications would be used in construction of both fences. The fence would be a three strand design with the top wire set at 40-42 inches above the ground and the bottom smooth wire set at 18 inches to provide for wildlife movement over and under the fence. The top wire would be flagged with white cloth at time of construction to make the fence more visible to deer and antelope until they become accustomed to the fence. Green steel fence post would be set at 22 foot intervals. Vehicles such as 4-wheel drive ATVs or trucks would be used to build the fence. Existing roads or ways would be used for access during fence construction and a minimal amount of off-road travel would occur along the fence lines. No blading along the fence line would be permitted either during construction or for maintenance of the existing fence. All construction debris (wire, posts, etc.) would be removed from the area upon completion of construction.

Construction of the fences would give the permittee eight pastures that would be grazed under a rest rotation system using 3 herds of yearling cattle. The native range pastures would be grazed for 1 month every other year and the crested wheatgrass pasture would be rested every other year during the critical growing season. Livestock grazing use within the new pastures would be closely monitored by field

personnel to insure compliance with land use plan grazing utilization limits to protect soils, vegetation and wildlife habitat.

B. Alternative I - No Action

The fences would not be constructed.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A. Proposed Action

The fences would allow improved control of livestock, thus enhancing a more uniform utilization throughout the pastures. The fences would change the livestock use patterns and grazing pressure on the new pastures. The pastures would be grazed at a higher stocking rate but for a shorter period of time. The increased grazing pressure in the crested wheatgrass pastures should prevent decadent plant formation and promote healthy, vigorous and productive plants. Key forage species within the pastures would continue to be monitored to protect soil, vegetation and wildlife habitat in the short term. The new crested wheatgrass pastures would be rested during the critical growing period every other year and the native range pastures would be grazed for one month in the spring every other year. Enough residual vegetation would be left in the crested and native range pastures to meet soil, watershed and wildlife objectives.

Some localized vegetation disturbance and soil compaction would occur from livestock and wildlife walking along the fences after the construction. Some off-road travel would be required to construct the fences resulting in vehicle tracks along fence-lines. Some short term impacts to vegetation and soil may occur from the vehicle tires. These impacts would be short lived and largely unnoticeable.

New fencing would be expected to result in an increase in the chance of wildlife entanglement or collisions in the short term. However, design standards to accommodate wildlife movement would be expected to mitigate wildlife movement concerns.

It is doubtful that the fence construction and the changes in livestock grazing patterns would affect forage availability for pronghorn or mule deer.

Current numbers of both species of game are generally low and complete livestock utilization of the new pasture is not expected.

Short term adverse impacts to wildlife during installation of the fence would be inconsequential. These impacts would include temporary animal avoidance of human activity areas and some direct losses of species such as reptiles.

An increase in the amount of conditioned forage (succulent green herbaceous forage available in growing season subsequent to grazing use or during pasture rest periods) would result from the proposed action. However, conditioned forage is not in short supply within the project area so the beneficial effects to big game and other animals would be considered very minor at best.

As a result of more interior pasture fencing, the amount of rangeland impacted by grazing use may increase, but herbaceous cover and structure important to sage grouse nesting should not decrease. There are no specific nesting activity data from the project area. Nesting use could be occurring because sage grouse strutting activity has been documented within a few miles of the project area. Sage grouse commonly fly several miles from their breeding sites in search of nesting habitat. However, the amount of structure (sagebrush) in the project area is very limited and would lead one to believe that limited, if any, nesting is occurring in the proposed project area. Due to the relatively small size of the project area, BLM believes that the amount of impact is not enough to threaten sage grouse productivity in the area. In addition, if sagegrouse activity does become an issue, the greater control of the native pastures would allow management of livestock grazing to be adjusted to meet nesting or other sagegrouse needs.

The project would have minimal visual impacts and his consistent with Class III Visual Resource.

In accordance with 36 CFR 800, the Resource Area Archeologist will conduct a files search and Class III cultural resource inventory to determine if the proposed action would have an effect on cultural resources. If cultural properties are found, the project would be moved to avoid the properties, or reevaluated if relocation is not feasible. The project is located in the undifferentiated volcanic uplands north of the Owyhee River. Surveys conducted in this and similar areas suggest significant cultural resources are unlikely to be found.

There are no federal candidate or listed wildlife species present within the project area. Consequently there is no requirement for BLM to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

No known or suspected threatened and endangered plants are known to occur within the area.

The construction of these fences would improve livestock distribution and utilization of the forage resource and lessen the adverse visual and resource impacts of disproportionate utilization levels that is occurring. Dividing the East and West Dry Creek pastures into two pastures would also facilitate in meeting land use plan management objectives and rangeland health standards for the entire area.

B. Alternative I - No Action

Under alternative I (no action), the fences would not be constructed; thus a disproportionate amount of livestock utilization would continue to occur within the pastures.

Denial of the project would result in a loss of plant vigor in the seeded portions of the pastures. The short term impacts would include increased old growth (i.e. "lignification") of leafy, plant material (i.e. wolfy) in the seedings which significantly reduces palatability and digestibility for livestock and wildlife. In the long term, increased wolf plant frequency would reduce overall health and productivity of the crested wheatgrass seedings. Moreover, the presence of "wolf" plants would create an unbalanced forage use pattern throughout the seeding. For example, a wolf plant would not be grazed while a non-wolf plant, immediately adjacent, would sustain a 60-80% use level. The long term impact of disproportionate grazing would increase through time consequently resulting in less useable forage within the seedings. Cumulative impacts would result from less available forage production in the crested wheatgrass seedings

thereby potentially increasing use levels on the native range portion of the pastures.

Avoidance of the requirement for new fencing would maintain the current level of potential for death or injury to wildlife due to entanglement or collisions. The minor short term adverse impacts to wildlife resulting from fence installation would also be avoided. Conditioned forage benefits for big game would be foregone but they are considered to be of minor value in the project area.

The amount of quality sage grouse nesting habitat in the proposed project area would remain unchanged. However, as described under the proposed action it is very unlikely that significant nesting activity takes place within the project area because of the lack of suitable structure (sagebrush) required for nesting.

MANDATORY ELEMENTS

The following mandatory elements are either not present or would not be affected by the proposed action or alternative:

<u>Critical Elements</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>
Air Quality		X
ACECs		X
Cultural Resources		X
Farmlands, Prime/Unique		X
Floodplains		X
Nat.Amer.Rel. Concerns		X
T&E Species		X
Wastes, Hazardous/Solid		X
Water Quality		X
Wetlands/Riparian Zones		X
Wild & Scenic Rivers		X
Wilderness		X
Wild Horses and Burros		X
Wildlife	X	

DESCRIPTION OF MITIGATION MEASURES AND RESIDUAL IMPACTS

To prevent compaction and rutting, off-road travel will be prohibited when there is high moisture content in the soil surface. Therefore, off-road travel will only be during times when the soil is dry or firm which should minimize adverse impacts to soil and vegetation. Topography will be used to the extent possible to shield off-road vehicle tracks from the recreating public.

In accordance with 36CFR8005(b), the District and the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) determined the proposed action will have no effect on cultural resources within the project area.

PERSONS/AGENCIES CONSULTED

Dean Durfee - Range Consultant
Ed Davis - Livestock Permittee

TomForre - “Acting” Supervisory Rangeland Management Specialist
Jon Sadowski - Wildlife Biologist
Jean Findley - Botanist
Alice Bronsdon - Archeologist
Bob Alward - “Acting” Outdoor Recreation Planner/Wilderness Specialist
Tom Hilken - “Acting” P&E Coordinator
Tom Hilken - Rangeland Management Specialist

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS

I have reviewed EA, OR-030-006 and determined that the proposed action with the mitigating measures will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and that an EIS is not required. I have determined that the proposed project is in conformance with the land use plan.

S/Jerry L. Taylor
Authorized Official

08/06/99
Date

DECISION/RATIONALE

I have determined that implementation of the proposed action and mitigation to authorize the construction of the fences in the East and West Dry Creek Pastures in the Arock Allotment, as outlined in EA, OR-030-99-006 is in conformance with the land use plan for the Jordan Resource Area. And the proposed project will improve and maintain vegetative and soil conditions to benefit watershed, wildlife and livestock.

Based on the above analysis, the proposed action would have little long term adverse impact. Minimal ground disturbance caused by the construction of the fences are more than off-set by improved utilization patterns, forage quality and livestock distribution.

My decision is to authorize the construction of approximately 5.5 miles of fence in the East and West Dry Creek Pastures of the Arock Allotment.

Grazing will be done in such a manner to ensure that the proper intensity, timing and duration of defoliation on crested wheatgrass and native range are followed. Through pasture rotation, subsequent grazing the following year will provide for periodic deferment to meet the physiological requirements of the key forage plants. Enough residual vegetation will be left to meet soil and watershed objectives and provide forage and cover for wildlife.

S/Thomas G. Forre, acting
Authorized Official

10/08/99
Date